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COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION
Nineteenth session
13-19 May and 3-8 September 1997

NOTE TO THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION

1. At the opening meeting of its nineteenth session, the Committee on Information decided to hold the session in two segments. Accordingly, during the first segment (13-19 May 1997), the Committee considered organizational matters and held the general debate under agenda item 6. The Committee also decided to continue its general debate during the second segment of the session (3-8 September 1997), when it would also take up agenda item 7 (Preparation and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its fifty-second session), taking into account the recommendations contained in the report of the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities (A/AC.198/1997/CRP.1, annex) and the proposals of the Secretary-General.

2. It may be recalled that in his letter dated 17 March 1997 addressed to the President of the General Assembly (A/51/829), the Secretary-General had identified as a principal challenge the need for a strengthened communications and information operation that would help increase global support for the Organization. In pursuit of that goal, the Secretary-General convened the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities, composed of communications experts from both within and outside the United Nations system.

3. The report of the Task Force, entitled "Global vision, local voice: a strategic communications programme for the United Nations", has been issued. As indicated in his proposals for the reform of the United Nations (A/51/950) announced on 16 July 1997, the Secretary-General concurs with the report's principal recommendations, which include:

(a) Placing the communications function at the heart of the strategic management of the Organization and consolidating all communications activities under a strong senior official who would be part of his immediate team, in order to turn the United Nations into an effective modern communications-oriented organization;

(b) Strengthening the Organization's capacity to communicate at the country level, so that the global messages, activities and information of the United Nations both reflect and are tailored to meaningful local contexts. This will entail establishing imaginative local partnerships, in close cooperation with Governments;

(c) Completing the process of integrating United Nations information centres into the offices of United Nations resident coordinators, but with a much stronger system of feedback and accountability. To ensure effective delivery of communications and information programmes, the resident coordinators should work closely with and report to the senior official in charge of United Nations communications activities;

(d) Creating a culture of communications throughout the Organization, with responsibility for public diplomacy being borne by all senior officials, ambassadors and the larger United Nations family;

(e) Recognizing the role of the General Assembly in providing strategic guidance and direction for the communications and information function, while giving the Secretariat much greater responsibility for determining the methods with which mandated goals will be met.

4. As already indicated, the Secretary-General is in concurrence with the conceptual approach and thrust of the recommendations of the Task Force. Additionally, he has received recommendations in this regard from the Executive Coordinator for Reform and the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management. He has also taken into account the views of the Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information. The Secretary-General is therefore proposing that the post for the communications and information function be at the Under-Secretary-General level. This reflects the importance that the Secretary-General attaches to the role of communications, not as a support function but as an integral part of the substantive programme of the United Nations. The new entity will be called the Office for Communications and Public Information. This dual change, and the leadership role that the Secretary-General envisages for communications and information, will ensure that a communications dimension is effectively integrated into the work of all the Organization's departments. Meeting the communications needs of these departments will be a central priority for the new Office.

5. In view of the Secretary-General's regular, direct and continuous contact with the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, the Office of the Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations and the Speechwriters's Unit, the Secretary-General's position is that these units should remain part of his Office. However, given the imperative of establishing a consolidated communications operation, the Under-Secretary-General will establish both strategic and close day-to-day working relations with these units to ensure that they operate as part of a fully integrated communications function through effective, substantive coordination.

6. With regard to United Nations information centres and services, a comprehensive review of this field network will incorporate the complex, ongoing process of integrating information centres in developing countries, as already

approved by consensus by the General Assembly. Further integration will be completed along the lines indicated by the Assembly, that is, on a case-by-case basis taking into account the views of the host country, and on the understanding that the information function and the autonomy of the centres would not be adversely affected. As the Secretary-General has repeatedly indicated, integration entails a unified approach in the field, with one premises and one flag. In integrated centres, resident coordinators would be responsible to the head of the Office for Communications and Public Information for developing and executing communications plans. In industrialized countries, where United Nations information centres are the main United Nations presence, a case-by-case review would envisage enhanced partnerships with members of the United Nations system and with United Nations-oriented groups such as United Nations associations, depending on their capacity. The use of national personnel for programme delivery would be stressed, and cost-effective and professional criteria would be applied in all these field offices. Moreover, information centres should be provided with sufficient resources, particularly those in countries where local media are less developed.

7. The recommendations of the Secretary-General will be reflected in the revised budget estimates to be submitted to the appropriate intergovernmental bodies during the forthcoming session of the General Assembly.

8. The Secretary-General will ensure that the approved proposals will be implemented in a professional manner, maintaining cost-effective programme delivery.

9. The Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information will keep the Secretary-General informed, as usual, of the deliberations of the Committee on Information.